

**RETENTION STRATEGIES OF *YOUQ TE WAYANG* IN
MANDALAY, MYANMAR:
A REGIONAL CULTURE STUDY**

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Abstract

This paper aims to find out the retention strategies of *youq te wayang* in Mandalay, Myanmar. Cultural theory and regional studies as well as a structural-functional design developed by Talcott Parsons are applied in this research. Structural-Functional Theory considers that life of society is a system. The system can be changed according to circumstances. This theory used to see through the change of art of *youq te wayang* as a system towards equilibrium. This is a qualitative descriptive research with literature review method and internet media observation. Result of this research indicates that the State's role as a main actor in the process of *youq te wayang* retention by performing a *youq te wayang* performance at Pagoda festival, thus people can see that religion function still exist today. State develops the structure by organizing performances. The second actor is Mandalay Marionettes Theater Company, which is able to keep the inheritance system of *youq te wayang* maintained. In addition, the Mandalay Marionettes Theater Company did some changes and innovations in the performance system of *youq te wayang* such as performance duration, stage decoration, aspect of story, language and management system.

Keywords : *Youq Te Wayang, Inheritance, Change, Innovation, Retention*

Introduction

One of well-known traditional arts in Southeast Asia is *wayang*¹. Most of Southeast Asian people has *wayang* puppet show. *Wayang* arts in Southeast Asia based on J.L.A Brandes study cited from Agus Aris Munandar (2014:15) who did in depth research study of cultural development of Southeast Asia on protohistoric period. Brandes stated that Southeast Asia inhabitant those live either in mainland or islands already has ten intelligences, one of them is the ability to make a puppet figure. Moreover, Coedes (2010) said that one of some civilization attainments of

¹ A Javanese word for a theatrical performance with puppets or human dancers. When the term is used to refer to kinds of puppet theatre, sometimes the puppet itself is referred to as *wayang*.

Austronesian peoples in Southeast Asia region before the entry of foreign culture is ancestor worship.

Wayang is one of traditional arts in Southeast Asia region that has been being performed until now. This indicates that the presence of *wayang* has important function and role in social life of society. One of *wayang* arts in the region of Southeast Asia is *youq te*² in Myanmar. *Youq te* performance is a *wayang* art from Myanmar which has been existing in the midst of modernization and globalization. *Youq te wayang* arts must compete with modern art that nowadays appears. Furthermore, the attitude of society, especially among the younger generation, those are no longer interested in the art of *youq te wayang*.

According to Khin Maung Htwe, the art of *youq te* is increasingly disappearing replaced by Myanmar modern art. As a result, the graph of *wayang* arts of *youq te* is currently declining, it can be seen from diminishing of enthusiasts who are willing to watch such performance and its frequency is increasingly low. The younger generation is no longer interested in playing the *wayang* arts of *youq te* (www.htweoomyanmar.com).

There is yet a group of people in the region of Mandalay, Myanmar who keep showing the retention process of *youq te wayang*. *Youq te wayang* still exist in the region of Mandalay, Myanmar. There is a question which can be seen from the above mentioned sentences, why has *youq te wayang* been being preserved in Mandalay. Accordingly, this paper tries to describe what and how *youq te wayang* performer's retention strategies are to keep it preserved in Mandalay as a cultural process in present context.

This research study uses the structural-functionalism theory developed by Talcott Parsons (1968), that was written in "The Structure of Social Action". This theory considers that life of society is a system. Parsons (1968) stated that social system is composed of a number of actors who interact with each other in an environment, the actor has motivation to optimize the satisfaction in a structured system of symbol culturally. Humans functionally are in an equilibrium state, known as integration approach or more popular called as an equilibrium structural-functional approach. To achieve the equilibrium, adaptations associated with adjustment to the environment and needs are required. Changes and innovations are ways to make adaptation.

Koentjaraningrat (1990: 108) added that changes may occur, due to the desires of communities, or the desire of individuals in the group of their supporters. In a sense, when there is a crisis in a concerned society, it means that there are those oppose the situation in such society because they are aware of the shortcomings exist in their surroundings and are not satisfied with such situation.

The method used in this research is descriptive method with qualitative approach. Sarwono (2006: 259) said that in a qualitative approach, data is descriptive, means that the data could be symptoms are categorized or in other

² "*Youq Te*" means a small doll. *Youq te* is a clone dolls that depict human and animals figures made of wood and played by using a thread or string.

forms, such as photos, videos, artifacts and field or site notes at the time of research study.

Santana (2007:5) said that the qualitative research conditions observation activities in locations where the facts, data, evidences or others are related to the research. The thinking of qualitative method based on facts or circumstances that occur, and try to explain, or interpret phenomena defined by various people and delivered to the researcher. Machfoedz (2009: 56) said that research with this qualitative terms is more emphasised on the issue of quality, and not quantity (numbers or data).

Descriptive method used in this study to describe data obtained by searching literature review and media observation. Literature review used to collect data as many as possible related to regional study, namely geographical overview and cultural regions of Myanmar, especially region of Mandalay. In addition, a literature review is used to trace the history, art, form, function and retention efforts of *youq te wayang*. Media observation conducted by observations obtained through youtube social media and websites that contain in the form of performances, pictures, and images associated with data objects. Observation methods used to obtain deeper observations in search of data related to the research.

In addition, this study uses interpretation method and regional study method. Interpretation method used to find symbols and meaning to the description and observation in order to obtain a deeper understanding of an issue. While regional study relates to cultural aspects of territory. Banks (1977: 274) said that the culture of tregon is a geographic area that has a number of cultural traits and other complexities.

Data source used in this research is secondary data obtained from print documents and electronic media related to *youq te wayang*. Data of print documents that used such as books, journals, articles, thesis papers, and dissertations. Electronic data are obtained through youtube and website of *youq te wayang* show. Moreover, data also obtained from informant or resource person in Myanmar conducted by interviewing via electronic mail (email).

Result and Analysis

1. Type of *Youq Te Wayang*

Myanmar knows only one type of *wayang*, which is made of wood named "youq te". Among various types of *wayang* in Southeast Asia, Myanmar *wayang* has a different characteristic compared to its neighbors *wayang*, Thailand and Cambodia. Myanmar *wayang* uses dolls made of wood that is driven by a rope or string. In comparison to *wayang* in Indonesia, *wayang* show performance in Myanmar is much more difficult. *Youq te wayang* is very complicated and requires a necessary skill because *youq te wayang* is played using about 20 ropes (string). Ropes are usually transparent or white and not visible from a distance. The unique thing of *youq te wayang* from Myanmar is that the stuffed men and women played

by puppeteer with same sex. A male doll has to be played by male puppeteer and female doll played by female.

Youq te wayang is a collaboration of various of art forms such as music, dance, sculpture, embroidery sequin (clothes), paintings and literature works. *Youq te wayang* has a unique or specific characteristic which is more emphasised on the art of dance. We can see the exciting performance, such as the prince figure playing ball with acrobatic dance by putting the ball on his back.

Daw Naing said that the selection of dolls based on the belief towards any prohibitions to put human on stage in Jataka story. Therefore, dolls were chosen to portray the human characters in the Jataka (www.mandalaymarionette.com). Puppet body of *wayang* is estimated of 50-60 cm. *Youq te wayang* puppet costume made from fabric decorated with decorative sequins, pearls, and gold. The dominant colors in the *youq te wayang* costume are red, green and yellow. For hair, prince and princess dolls using genuine human hair. Uniquely, their hair is always washed, brushed and oiled by the puppeteer.

Youq te wayang performance usually performed on stage in a room made of woven bamboo. *Wayang* performance stage made of bamboo with a size of 3x4 square meters. The stage is equipped with a screen in the form of a curtain that can be opened and closed. Behind the curtain there is a screen decorated with a picture of a castle, forests, villages, and others according to the scenes stories.

Height of decoration screen in a *youq te wayang* show is as high as adults waist. Meanwhile, the puppeteers work behind the scenes. They play the doll or puppet (*wayang*) from the stage. The backdrop is royal throne, at the right hand is background of the forest and on the left is ritual umbrella background. Under the stage, a group of musicians facing the stage and their back to the audience. Chairs are provided for audiences that facing the stage. There is one neon installed on stage as a beam.

Some instruments used to accompany *youq te wayang* called *hsaing waing*. *Hsaing waing* consists of 21 drums made in a form of loop (*Patt waing*), small gong in a circular shape (*Kyi waing*), bigger gong in the form of rectangular (*Maung hsaing*), flutes, and cymbals (Htin Aung, 1937: 144).

Music also accompanies the dance scene in *youq te wayang* such as ballet and acrobatics. Characteristic of *youq te wayang* dances are quick and agile movements. *Youq te wayang* in dance scene became the forerunner to the dance form in Myanmar. Myanmar dance is a mixture of pre-Hindu dance, Indians, Thai classical dance and *youq te* puppet movement (Sein, 1965: 23).

Narrative aspects of Myanmar *wayang* story comes from Jataka (story about the birth of Buddha) affected by the Theravada Buddhism from India in the year 500 AD. Most of story plot is taken from Buddhist scriptures.

Total of characters in *youq te wayang* is about 28 figures those are a symbol of basic elements of universe life in this world. It was influenced by Buddha teaching, which represents four basic elements, namely, earth, wind, fire, and water as well as 24 secular layers from holy book of Abhidhama Pitaka. In this book mentioned 28 attributes of human life is symbolically engraved on the doll,

including mythological figures. In addition, there is a belief to not perform the show with an odd number of characters (www.myanmartravelinformation.com).

Before performing, puppeteer also performs some ritual. They summon the holy gods to bless puppets. The puppeteer sprinkles them (*wayang*) with holy water as a protection from evil spirits. In every *wayang* shows, there is always a special dance (spiritual dance) which is dedicated to grout that dancing an opening prayer for the spirit. In that ritual, there is also provided offerings of a large plate that contains coconut and banana. The offerings used as a symbol to interact with the ancestors. This is usually conducted by a puppeteer or a woman pastor as an intermediary between the gods and the audiences.

2. History of *Youq Te Wayang* in Mandalay, Myanmar

Youq te wayang has a long history in Mandalay peoples' memory. Mandalay is a region in the dry plains that is located in the middle of Myanmar. Mandalay is the second largest of capital city of Myanmar. In the heyday of Konbaung dynasty (1783), Mandalay became the royal capital. Mandalay provided many diverse cultures and traditional art centers of Myanmar as well as Burmese royal heritage historical sites in this city (Facts About Burma, 1983: 66). Moreover, first *youq te wayang* created in the region of Mandalay so that city has a strong influence on the spread of Buddhism. Performance of *youq te wayang* conducted by itinerant troupe performing the show as a means of understanding propaganda of Buddhism, the notion of social heirarki, and imperial history at that time to the audience who stayed in the village (Ricklefs, 2013: 209). Therefore, *youq te wayang* was used to spread Buddhism.

In *Youq te wayang* history, the cultural influence of immigrant in the art of *youq te wayang* at the present time is very strong. The process of assimilation and acculturation came from immigrant nations, such as India, China, Thailand, and the UK was instrumental in forming the art of *youq te wayang* which has its own peculiarities and value for society in Mandalay, Myanmar. Although not fully adopted, another source said that Myanmar *wayang* is inspired by Thailand's. Reid (2011: 243) said that not many people knew about Myanmar theatre before the massive impersonation pioneered by the tradition of Thai palace in the 18th century during the reign of Konbaung (1752-1885 AD). Myanmar did not adopt that *wayang* show as a whole. The form used in *wayang* show is a form of dolls made of wood, not the shadow puppets or *wayang* like those from Thailand. In line with it, Htin Aung (1937: 35) said that Myanmar *wayang* is the adoption of Thai puppet (*wayang*) that was presented from the Thai court officials were arrested.

Its acculturation could be seen from storytelling, such as Ramayana and Jataka stories. Chinese acculturation is seen in musical instruments being played and costumes. One of factors that facilitate the process is common socio-cultural and religion values. Buddhism is the glue of the cultural acculturation process in Myanmar. In addition, acculturation occurs because of an openness attitude of people in Myanmar, especially the Mandalay people in receiving elements which

come from outside. They absorbed new cultures and adopted it into their local culture. Such attitudes also continued to be kept until the colonial period. There was also acculturation process of *youq te wayang* in colonial period, especially the form of stage and decorations of *youq te wayang*. Cultural assimilation occurred by replacing the name of character that adapted to their local culture, such as the Hindu god of India becomes Myanmar Buddhist god called nats (Desai, 1970: 18).

History of *youq te wayang* development is a process of Mandalay society identity. *Youq te wayang* still exist because its history shows that *youq te wayang* is a collective experience of the past that had been passed from generation to generation. Thus, it is not surprising if *youq te wayang* is still maintained today and always be a part of Mandalay people in Myanmar.

3. Retention of *Youq Te Wayang* in Mandalay, Myanmar

The reverberation of *youq te wayang arts* has been dashed rapidly by modernization and globalization. Eventhough it was one of quite well known Myanmar arts in its previous golden age. There is also mentioned in some online articles that state of traditional *youq te* puppet or *wayang* theater in Myanmar is in a worrying condition. Globalization challenge also affects the existence of traditional art of *youq te wayang*. There is a change in values and tastes of society has made traditional arts increasingly cornered because younger generation taste who tend to adore global culture. It can be seen from the number of arts groups of *youq te wayang* can be counted in number and quantity of the audience. The phenomenon of increasingly declining audience in a *youq te wayang* show is enough to provide proof that it has been increasingly less attractive. If the spectator or audience aspect was a main indicator used in determining the existence of a *youq te wayang* group, then its performance fate would be threatened. The audiences are as imagination space of interest presence on performance market which clearly can not be overemphasized. Its existence is an integral part of *youq te wayang*.

Current condition of *youq te wayang* has led to several communities in the region of Mandalay, Myanmar perform *youq te wayang* as an effort to preserve it. Mandalay region, Myanmar is still very consistent in maintaining *youq te wayang* arts. It is caused due to Mandalay region is a region which has a long history in the development of *youq te wayang*. There is a *wayang* studio named Mandalay Marionettes Theater. Furthermore, *youq te wayang* is still performed in religious events or temple festivals organized by local authorities in Mandalay, Myanmar.

According to Ayu Sutarto (2009: 9), there are three things can sustain the existence of an art. First, it must have an active heir who has a strong commitment to preserving the performing arts that they would like to maintain. Second, a faithful passive heir to come and buy the staging because a passive heir is a market that can support the existence of a performing art. Thirdly is the State interference. Moreover, to see the continuity of a tradition can also be seen from several aspects, namely transmittion aspect (inheritance), speaker aspect, role or realm aspect (related to changes in functionality), documentation aspect, and regulatory aspect

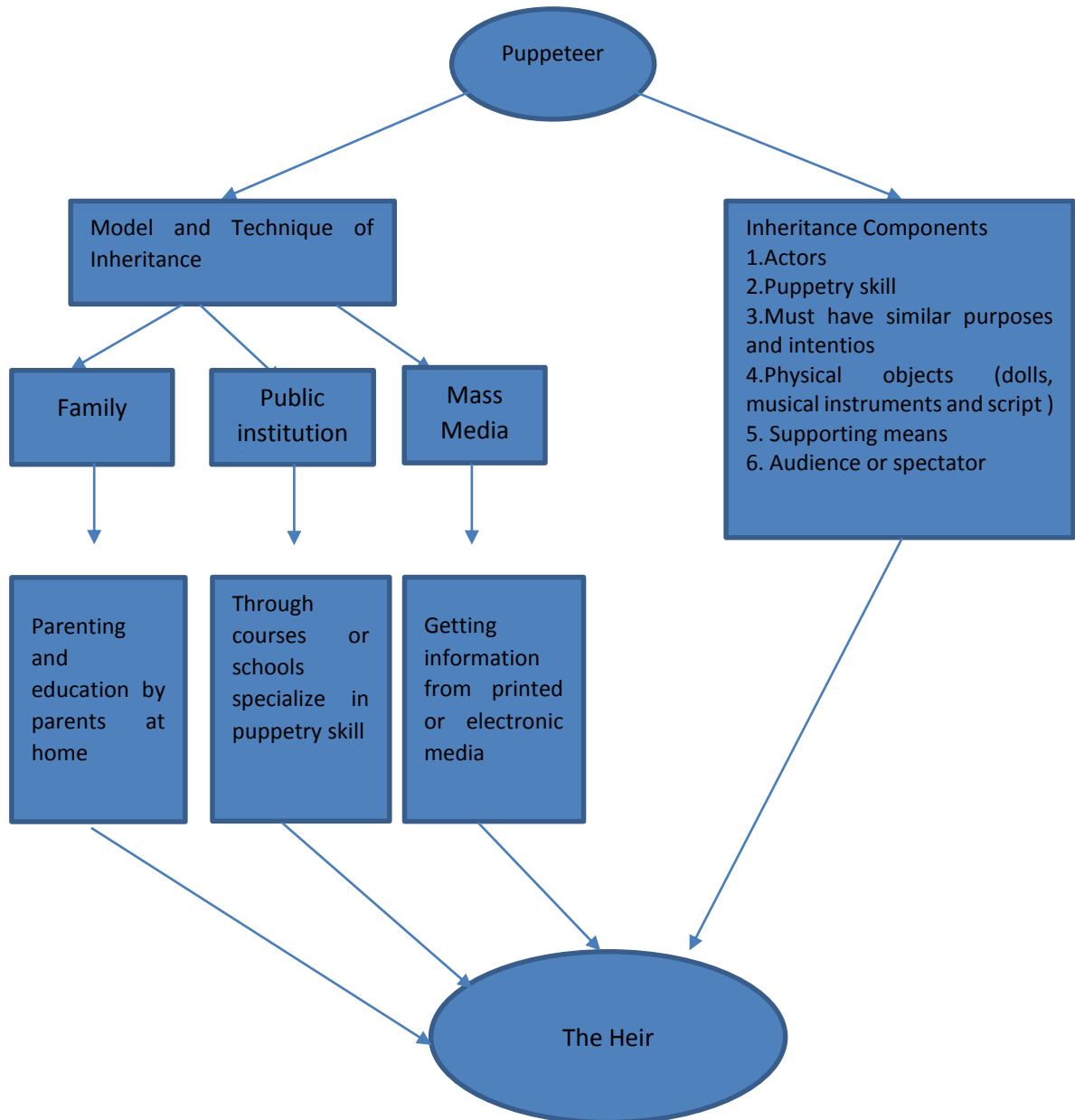
(the role of government). If you notice, *youq te wayang* still has all three of these criteria. The role of third criteria can support the sustainability of *youq te* arts.

a. Inheritance System

The art of *youq te wayang* at this time still persist due to Mandalay society has their own way of passing it. The continuity and sustainability of *youq te wayang* rely on inheritance. In other words, they depend on public awareness, especially speakers and actors of traditions to pass down to future generations. If the inheritance aspect is hampered, then the existence of an artistic tradition is in extinction.

There are elements or supporting components and methods or techniques in inheritance of *youq te wayang* that used during the process of inheritance. Inheritance system of *youq te wayang* can be described in a chart as follows.

Inheritance Pattern of *Youq te Wayang*



b. Changes and Adaptation of *Youq te Wayang*

Structural-functional approach is reflected in all changes of society as a social system that is functionally integrated into the equilibrium shape. Structural-functional approach that became theory in this study reflected in the following explanation.

(1) Changes occurred in *youq te wayang* carried out continuously and gradually. Change of form occurred because of the adjustment process with the state of social political situation developed in Myanmar. *Youq te wayang* has been doing a lot of progresses and changes since prehistoric period. Its change is not only in the form of a *wayang* show, but also its function and meaning.

(2) Changes occurred in *youq te wayang* are more influenced by external factors. The external factors that are more affected by new culture in Myanmar which carried out by other nations.

(3) Changes in the structure of *youq te wayang* conducted as a form of continuously adaptation and innovation process. Such changes relate to the structure of the staging, decoration and elements of story. The purpose of its changing is maintaining the art of *youq te wayang* to achieve a dynamic equilibrium in order to stay afloat in the midst of globalization and competition of arts industry.

c. Establishment of *Youq te Wayang Studio (Company)*

An effort to preserve *youq te wayang* is to establish a *youq te wayang* studio or company in Mandalay. There is a group of *youq te wayang* named Mandalay Marionettes Theater. The puppet group of *youq te wayang* in Mandalay region which often performs every night. *Youq te Wayang* show in Mandalay, Myanmar is performed specially to attract the attention of foreign tourists who visited Myanmar.

Mandalay Marionettes Theatre is an important asset for Myanmar peoples, especially Mandalayans, it has become an art since their ancestors time. Ma Ma Naing further said that the puppet doll is not just entertainment, but it has a high value that can be enjoyed by all levels of society. Playing puppet is a way to remind someone to a specific event. Additionally, they can be a media to learn literature, religion and history. He also said that the puppet players (puppeteer) are getting older. That is the reason why Mandalay Marionettes Theater has been established (<http://www.mandalaymarionette.com>).

Management strategy of Mandalay Marionettes Theatre in order for their company to be widely known, they conducted a campaign or promotion by spreading over some brochures and electronic media such as websites so that tourists that visit the region of Mandalay will see the *youq te wayang* show and buy some crafts products made by Mandalay people like Myanmar traditional puppets and accessories.

Cultural promotion carried out by *youq te* group in Mandalay is not only conducted in the form of performances that specially organized to please local people and tourists (art performance), but also as an annual religious ritual of Buddhists at Pagoda festival. At that time, many foreign tourists come to watch the performance. That is a part of innovation made by *youq te wayang* group in Mandalay by creating traditional arts which based on tourism. One of alternative

strategies towards cultural development is cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is a kind of travel to another place locally or internationally with the intent to learn the indigenous customs, culture, and local arts (Nyoman S Pendit, 2006).

Youq te wayang with its uniqueness will earn a high value. As one of cultural tourism of traditional arts-based, *youq te wayang* has such strengths and characteristics that make itself more attractive. That uniqueness can be seen from the puppeteers, dance, music, and language used by them as well as its supporting communities.

d. Role of Myanmar Government

Development on aspects of government policy, particularly related to traditional arts, requires serious attention. It is an opposite opinion that the traditional arts as a part of growing culture at local level that its existence can not be denied. Its position is considered important and strategic to sustain and encourage the development properly at local level.

Government policy in the field of art according to Sedyawati (1981: 50) is that the term of developing traditional performing arts has more quantitative than qualitative connotations. Quantitatively, developing arts means to develop arts by raising the volume of performances and extending its promotion areas. Thus government provides more spaces or facilities to make traditional arts more widely known.

In addition, government policies must also be related to society or community awareness of the importance of *youq te wayang*. It can be achieved if the government made the development of awareness to communities through propaganda that covers various sectors: education, political, economic, social and cultural.

The government's role is indicated by funding to a group of *youq te wayang* to perform overseas. At that time, it is government's role in providing all proper facilities required for them to do performance. Long term government policy in Myanmar associated with *youq te wayang* is establishing an arts and culture major at National University of Art and Culture, Myanmar. One major or department in that university is classic traditional arts, including *youq te wayang*. Through formal education, it is expected that *youq te wayang* arts will continue to exist and grow.

An important role of government in retention effort of *youq te wayang* can be seen at Pagoda Festival of Myanmar society. *Youq te wayang* is obliged to be performed at such festival as a ritual and entertainment for Myanmar people. At the event, they are very enthusiastic and flocked to watch the performance.

If it is associated with Parsons theory that emphasizes the role status of structural components, in this case, government has a role as a main actor in retention process of *youq te wayang*. The government builds the structure by organizing *youq te wayang* performance at Pagoda Festival. In this case, this performance is mandatory to be held at Pagoda festival. It becomes a social system

that continues to be done continuously. If this social system continues, it can be assumed that *youq te wayang* performance will survive.

In addition, the government has a role in building structures of *youq te wayang* company in Mandalay. And State provides the opportunity and access to develop the studio or company. Actors who developed the system of *youq te wayang* company is management party that governing all structures as their effort to preserve *youq te wayang*. Both systems support each other. This is similar to what Parsons said that social system must be supported by other systems to live on.

Furthermore, Parsons also concerned with internalization and socialization aspects. In order to achieve a successful socialization, values and norms will be internalized and become a part of actor's object and intention. To attain these objectives, it should indicate the actors are executing whole system. Parsons argued that a cultural system should be equal with another system of action. It means that culture is a system of symbol that is well patterned and arranged, personality aspect that is internalized and institutional patterns in social system. Therefore it can be said that the structure of personality comes from social system and culture through socialization. Values and norms contained in *youq te wayang* are expected to continue to be socialized to younger generation. Thus, the structural system in retention process of *youq te wayang* will continue.

Conclusion

The result of this study indicates that *youq te wayang* is a puppet (*wayang*) made of wood played using a rope (string) and played by Burmese ethnic groups in Myanmar. Long history of *youq te wayang* is a result of assimilation and acculturation process that come from immigrant nations, such as India, China, Thailand, and the United Kingdom that was instrumental in forming the art of *youq te wayang* which has its own peculiarities and value for people in Myanmar. By looking at the historical development of *youq te wayang* then we can see changes in its form from time to time that it still exist today.

The art of *youq te wayang* still exist due to the enactment of inheritance system and some changes created innovatively such as performance duration, stage decoration, aspect of story, and language, as well as management systems like marketing and human resources. Furthermore, *youq te wayang* is still used by Myanmar people in religious activities. If religion function still exist, it can be assumed that *youq te wayang* will survive. Moreover, a group of Mandalay people need to realize the importance of *youq te wayang* as a symbol of identity of Myanmar people should remain preserved.

Youq te wayang arts is currently under transformation because of the necessity in creating new art which is more modern to make more people interested. The change that occurred is a kind of adaptation made by puppet artists of *youq te wayang* in facing globalization, particularly in terms of science and technology. A change does not always have a bad impact for traditional art. That is sometimes needed to keep a tradition alive. This is in line with what Talcott Parsons said that

the change in social system is done through the stages of adjustment. The form changes in *youq te wayang* are caused by an adjustment process along with developing social and political situation in Myanmar. It is undeniable that without the ability to create new ideas and to change patterns of behavior, there will be no individual in this society can survive. Eventhough we have a solid and steady culture, sometimes we need flexibility to get used to various circumstances.

Important actors in building retention structure of *youq te wayang* are State and Mandalay Marionettes Theater Company. The State becomes an important actor in the retention effort of *youq te wayang*. It can be seen from their performances at Pagoda festival which is always held by government. During performance, Myanmar people flock to watch *youq te wayang* in comparison to performances hosted by studio or company. This indicates that ritual function of *youq te wayang* become important in maintaining the structure of *youq te wayang*.

Mandalay Marionettes Theater Company has an important role in maintaining the art of *youq te wayang*. It is through them, a transmission system (inheritance) is formed and done continuously so that the existence of *youq te wayang* will still exist. Although such studio or company is the only one in Mandalay region, its presence provides a very important role for the sustainability of *youq te wayang*.

At this time, entertainment and economic function dominate *youq te wayang*. It survives on some travel events which is performed to entertain foreign tourists. In addition, orientation change of function that is originally sacred, now becomes profane so it is common and accepted by people in Myanmar. It is inseparable from the role of government to build a network for the structural system towards equilibrium.

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